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SUBJECT: URIBE'S CONGRESSIONAL DISTRACTION

REF: BOGOTA 8108

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer
Reason: 1.5 (b,d)

Summary

11. (C) President Uribe's congressional coalition is disorganized and increasingly ineffective; his legislative agenda has suffered, with key bills stalled. Opposition parties have taken the initiative in Congress and won several symbolic victories. Still, presidential advisors believe that through a mix of personal lobbying and compromise, Uribe will eventually obtain congressional approval of his legislative priorities. End Summary.

Uribe Allies Disorganized

12. (C) Members of Congress told us Uribe's fragile congressional coalition (reftel) had already lost two votes in Congress because it was disorganized and lacked leadership. Luis Serrano, spokesman of the U party in the House of Representatives, said Uribe lacked a clear legislative strategy. He added that the government had no identifiable congressional operator, and ministers did not return his phone calls. Senator Miguel Pinedo, spokesman for the Radical Change Party, said coalition party leaders met with Uribe regularly, but to little effect. The president had refused to dole out government positions as is traditional, and party leaders were in turn not taking care of member needs. Pinedo said the "Ley de Bancadas," which requires party voting discipline, had damaged Uribe's relations with Congressional members, because the president had been cultivating only party leaders. He echoed Serrano's charge that ministers "were AWOL."

13. (C) Jose Name, longtime Liberal senator and U Party co-founder, said Radical Change Party leader (and Senator) German Vargas Lleras' presidential ambitions would keep Uribe's coalition on "thin ice." Name, Polo Senator Ivan Moreno, and others predicted Vargas Lleras would leave the coalition by July and return to the Liberal party--with most of his Radical Change Congressional colleagues in tow. Name and Moreno speculated that around five of the fifteen Radical Change senators would stay with the governing coalition if

Vargas Lleras jumped ship.

Opposition More United, Predict Further Uribe Troubles

14. (C) Uribe's closest supporters told us only the opposition Liberal and Polo parties had a coherent strategy in Congress. House President Alfredo Cuello confided that the opposition was "running circles" around the Uribe coalition. Liberal Party chief and former President Cesar Gaviria told us he saw no leadership or organization in the coalition, and was amazed at recent U party public infighting. Polo Senator Moreno claimed Uribe's coalition would likely fall apart when new Congressional leaders are selected in July 2007.

Key Legislation Stalled

15. (C) Uribe's legislative agenda has been stalled. Conservative Party leader Roberto Gerlein and Conservative Representative Alonso Acosta told us Uribe's proposed legislation on tax and intergovernmental transfers was "out of touch with political reality" would only pass with substantial revisions and presidential intervention. Members of Congress remained optimistic Uribe can rally Congress just before the December recess, if he shows flexibility. Uribe made large concessions on the transfer bill, and reportedly had to pay off three key Conservative coalition senators with plum jobs, to get the transfer bill through its first vote in Senate commission. Insiders tell us that full Senate passage is likely, but that House passage will be "very close" and require more direct presidential intervention and compromise. On a positive note, no member of Congress said support for the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement had been affected by the Uribe coalition's early congressional missteps.

Administration Acknowledges Coalition Problem

16. (C) Presidential advisor (and former senate President) Fabio Valencia Cossio told us the President's governing coalition was "dysfunctional," and that the president was having to use valuable political capital--and time--to keep the group together. Still, he predicted that the president would be able to obtain congressional passage of key legislation with a mix of personal lobbying and compromise.
DRUCKER